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ABSTRACT

Students often see revision not as an opportunity to develop and improve a piece of writing but as an indication that they have failed to do it right the first time. To them, revision means correction. To correct this assumption, teachers' comments on papers should focus on more than mechanics. Teachers would do well to comment on the paper's content and to encourage students to investigate the most successful or most essential sections of the paper. Allowing students to collaborate in their writing, either with the teacher or with other students, helps students to grasp the concept of revision. Also, publishing student writing can be a powerful means of motivating revision. Whether computers help students to conceive of writing as a constant process of revision is not clear; research results are divided. Contains 18 references. (TB)

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*by Fran Lehr*

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# Revision in the Writing Process

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Although Donald Murray (1982) argues that writing is rewriting, students often see revision not as an opportunity to develop and improve a piece of writing but as an indication that they have failed to do it right the first time. To them, revision means correction. This attitude is attributable partly to textbooks, in which revision is often defined as the act of "cleaning up" or "polishing" prose, and partly to instructional practices that treat revision as cosmetic changes rather than as rethinking one's work (Sommers, 1982). Revision, however, is the heart of the writing process—the means by which ideas emerge and evolve and meanings are clarified. This Digest hopes to provide information that can help in changing students from "correctors" to "revisers."

## What Is Revision?

Revision is often defined as the last stage in the writing process (prewriting, writing, and revision). Sommers (1982), on the other hand, sees revision as "a process of making changes throughout the writing of a draft, changes that work to make the draft congruent with a writer's changing intentions."

## How Much Do Students Revise?

For the novice writer, however, revision appears to be synonymous with editing or proofreading. An NAEP (1977) study found that students' efforts at revision in grades 4, 8, and 11 were devoted to changing spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Students seldom made more global changes, such as starting over, rewriting most of a paper, adding or deleting parts of the paper, or adding or deleting ideas (Applebee, et al., 1986). Even older college students appear to follow this model of surface changes. Yoder (1993) examined journalism students' attitudes about revision and the kinds of changes they made as they revised. She also found that surface level changes predominated over meaning changes.

## How Can Teachers Help Students to Revise?

Merely requiring students to revise or just to spend more time revising will not necessarily produce improved writing (Adams, 1991). Direct teacher intervention, however, seems to produce positive results. Hillocks (1982), for example, examining teacher comment, prewriting instruction, and revision, discovered that instruction focused on specific goals and skills "coupled with the presence...of revision" improved the quality of the writing produced by seventh and eighth graders. Robinson (1985) found that children in grades 2-6 produced better stories when they revised in response to teacher questions directed at specific content. In another study, Dale (1994) found that collaborative writing seemed to move ninth grade students toward "more thoughtful, sophisticated writing habits."

Sommers (1982) found that teacher comments on college students' writing were usually text-specific and, therefore, not helpful. Further, the comments often took students' attention away from their own purposes and focused it on those of the teacher. Sommers suggests that teachers provide more specific comments and design writing activities that allow students to establish purpose in their writing.

Calkins (1986) recommends that students discuss positive rather than negative aspects of their writings. "Why not," she asks, "ask them to find bits of their writing—words, lines, passages—which seem essential, and then ask them to explore why these sections are so very significant?"

Publishing student writings can be a powerful means of motivating revision. Publication instills pride and provides an incentive to produce good work. According to Simic (1993), "acknowledgement of good writing, whether it is peer or adult, helps build an awareness of the importance of writing." Giving students the opportunity to share their writing through hardback books, newspapers, or newsletters, or through oral presentations to other students shows them that quality matters, "and that quality is achieved through revision" (Balajthy, 1986). Additionally, Balajthy recommends providing students with in-class time for revision and allowing flexibility in due dates as a way to encourage students to engage in more extensive revision.

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## Can Computers Improve Revision Skills?

The ease with which students can manipulate text with word processing programs has prompted increased computer use in the writing classroom as a means of promoting student revision. However, the research on whether computers lead students to revise more frequently or more effectively is somewhat inconclusive. In her study of the effects of word processing on the revision strategies of advanced college freshman writers, Hawisher (1986) found that students using computers did not revise more than those using pen and paper, nor were there differences in the quality ratings of the two writing groups. Working with interested tenth and eleventh graders, Kurth (1986) discovered that while word processing motivated students to write and promoted group discussions, it did not affect either the length of compositions or the amount and quality of revisions made. Daiute (1986) found that seventh and ninth graders who used computers made revisions involving longer segments of their draft texts, but the same students revised less frequently when using computers than when using pen and paper.

More positive findings are reported by Flinn (1986), Womble (1984), and Owston (1991). Flinn found that sixth graders using computers to revise compositions wrote longer papers and received slightly higher holistic scores than those using pen and paper. However, the most striking differences between the groups had less to do with computers than with an instructional emphasis on fluency, word choice, and mechanics. Womble observed that students using word processing tended to work longer on their writing, to make more changes in the text, and to develop a better sense of audience than they did when writing in the traditional manner. Studying eighth graders who were very familiar with computers and word processing, Owston found that papers written on the computer were rated significantly higher than those written by hand. Scorers did not know in which manner the papers had originally been written, but they consistently judged the computer written papers superior on all scales of judgment. Data indicated that students continuously revised and edited their work at all stages of the writing process, with most of the revision done in the initial drafting session, making the traditional distinction between draft and final versions of a piece less meaningful.

Perhaps, as Tone and Winchester (1988) have argued, the computer offers real facilitation of revision "to writers who know how to compose on one." This would back up Owston's (1991) findings, and with the current proliferation of personal computers allowing for a larger segment of the population available for study, more conclusive data as to the computer's effectiveness should soon be forthcoming.

It appears, however, that revision, whether done with computers or with pen and paper, will go beyond correction only if teachers emphasize the whole text over its parts. When this happens, students discover the power of writing as a means of shaping ideas and clarifying meanings rather than as a way of correcting errors or fulfilling a class requirement.

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